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ABSTRACT

This paper examines two types of retention, semester and annual, and how they vary by student status, gender, race, program, degree sought, and age. The Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory, together with the faculty and student focus groups, provided valuable data to draw up strategies to improve retention and thus contribute to overall institutional effectiveness. The main source for the data is from The Community College of Baltimore County (MD). Three-year data (fall-to-fall and fall-to spring) were used for the trend analysis. The retention rate of students from fall-to-spring (semester) was generally higher than from fall-to-fall (annual). The semester retention rate for full-time students was significantly higher than for part-time students. Retention rates were generally higher among females, whites, and students who had declared their majors or sought an AA-degree or certificate. The annual retention rate among full-time students was higher than part-time students. The highest retention rate was observed among students who were 60 and over. The focus group results supported several of the Noel-Levitz Survey findings. For example, the areas that supported the survey findings were financial aid, advising, registration process, student safety, parking, and career guidance. The focus group also identified areas that needed additional attention: support for evening students, availability of full-time faculty, class cancellations, and additional information on Learning First. (VWC)

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RETENTION AND ITS IMPACT ON INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AT A LARGE URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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RETENTION AND ITS IMPACT ON INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AT A LARGE URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Strategic enrollment management plans and programs undertaken by colleges and universities have led to a renewed interest in retention studies. Also, most governing bodies require colleges to include retention as one of the outcome measures in their accountability reports. In addressing this issue, the college educators increasingly recognize that there are different types of retention and the rates vary among different groups of students. Strategies to improve retention will result in increased percentages of students graduating or making substantial progress toward their goal. This paper presents trend data on retention, both fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall. It also examines the retention rates by student characteristics. In addition, Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Survey as well as Faculty and Student Focus Groups were conducted to find ways to improve retention. These findings along with the implications and possible strategies are presented.

RETENTION AND ITS IMPACT ON INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AT A LARGE URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

BACKGROUND

Lately, retention studies are taking greater importance at the community college level. Accountability and budget constraints might be some of the reasons. It has been known that there are enough differences in the retention patterns at community colleges compared to four-year institutions. Seppanen (1995) described a methodology for tracking student progress in community colleges. Lenning et al. (1980) reported two types of retention: program completion and term completion. Baird (1990) reported that the problems of community college drop-out stems from the great diversity of students enrolled. Student characteristics (race, full-time/part-time, age, etc.) and educational goals are predictors of student retention (Sibolski and Snider, 1996). Bailey et al. (1998) conducted a system-wide student satisfaction survey spanning 14 universities and reported that the satisfaction ratings were most highly correlated with eventual withdrawal from the university. The present study is focused on examining two types of retention, semester and annual, and how they vary among student status, gender, race, program, degree sought, and age. The Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory together with the faculty and student focus groups provided valuable data to draw up strategies to improve retention and thus contribute to the overall institutional effectiveness.

METHODOLOGY

The main source for the data is from The Community College of Baltimore County, which has three campuses (Catonsville, Dundalk, and Essex) and enrolls over 23,000 credit students. Three-year data were used for the trend analysis. Matching the fall enrollment file of the students with the subsequent spring enrollment file produced the semester retention rate matrices. The annual

retention rate was determined by matching the fall enrollment file with the subsequent fall enrollment file of the students. The data was analyzed by student characteristics and other identified factors described previously. In addition, the retention rates for the three campuses were separately analyzed. During the Spring Semester 2000, the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory was administered to randomly selected course sections across three campuses. It consists of over 70 items covering the full range. of college experience. Each statement includes a rating scale of 1 to 7. Students rate the level of importance they assign to the expectation as well as their level of satisfaction that the expectation is being met. Also, during the same period focus groups of students and faculty facilitated by an expert consultant were held on the three campuses. Both groups were presented with seven broad areas (college image, registration, class schedule, rating of academic preparedness and support services, factors causing student attrition, and suggestions for improvement).

RESULTS

The analysis revealed that the retention rate of students from fall-to-spring was generally higher than from fall-to-fall. The average semester rate for all students was 61 percent, while the annual retention rate was 43 percent.

Semester Retention (Fall-to-Spring) (Table 1)

The semester retention rate among full-time students was significantly higher (75%) than part-time students (55%). There was no significant difference in retention rates among first-time and continuing students which stood around 61 percent. The retention rates were generally higher among females, whites, and students who had declared their majors (transfer or career) or sought an AA-degree or certificate. Younger students between the ages 17 and 19 and students aged 60 years or older had higher retention rates (73% and 70% respectively) than the other age groups.

There was no significant difference in semester retention rates among the three campuses.

Table 1
Semester Retention (Fall-to-Spring)

		Fall 1996 to Spring 1997	Fall 1997 to Spring 1998	Fall 1998 to Spring 1999
ALL STUDENTS		**62%**	**62%**	**61%**
Status				
	Full-Time	74%	75%	75%
	Part-Time	57%	57%	55%
	First-Time College	60%	61%	61%
	Not First-Time	62%	62%	61%
Gender				
	Male	60%	59%	59%
	Female	63%	63%	63%
Race				
	White	63%	62%	62%
	African-American	58%	60%	59%
	Other	59%	62%	59%
Program				
	Transfer	64%	64%	64%
	Career	63%	63%	62%
	General Studies	59%	61%	59%
	Undeclared	57%	55%	56%
Degree Sought				
	AA	65%	65%	64%
	Certificate	57%	62%	57%
	No Degree	53%	52%	54%
Age				
	17-19	72%	72%	73%
	20-29	59%	58%	57%
	30-49	58%	60%	57%
	50-59	49%	50%	52%
	60 and over	72%	68%	70%

Annual Retention Rate (Fall-to-Fall) (Table 2)

The annual retention rate among full-time students was higher (51%) than part-time students (41%). The fall-to-fall retention rates were generally higher among females, whites, and students who had sought AA-degree or certificate. There was no difference in the annual retention rates among those students who had declared majors and those who did not. The highest retention rate

(62%) was observed among students who were 60 and over. The next group, which had higher annual retention rate, was between the ages 17 and 19. The overall annual retention rates were slightly higher (45%) at Essex and Dundalk campuses than at Catonsville campus (41%). These differences by campus could be due to the differences in the student body composition.

Table 2
Annual Retention (Fall-to-Spring)

		Fall 1995 to Fall 1996	Fall 1996 to Fall 1997	Fall 1997 to Fall 1998
ALL STUDENTS		**43%**	**43%**	**44%**
Status				
	Full-Time	51%	48%	51%
	Part-Time	40%	41%	41%
	First-Time College	45%	42%	46%
	Not First-Time	43%	43%	43%
Gender				
	Male	41%	41%	40%
	Female	45%	45%	46%
Race				
	White	44%	44%	44%
	African-American	41%	40%	43%
	Other	41%	39%	43%
Program				
	Transfer	44%	43%	44%
	Career	44%	44%	45%
	General Studies	42%	41%	42%
	Undeclared	42%	45%	44%
Degree Sought				
	AA	46%	45%	45%
	Certificate	41%	39%	43%
	No Degree	37%	37%	37%
Age				
	17-19	53%	51%	55%
	20-29	38%	38%	38%
	30-49	41%	42%	41%
	50-59	39%	36%	36%
	60 and over	64%	66%	62%

Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Survey and Focus Group Summaries (Table 3)

The survey findings are presented with three scores for each item: an importance score, a

satisfaction score, and performance gap score. The gap is calculated by subtracting the satisfaction score from the importance score. A larger gap on an item indicates that the institution is not meeting the expectation. A smaller gap, on the other hand, indicates that the institution is close to meeting the expectations. A negative gap reveals that the institution is exceeding the students' expectations.

Smallest Gap - Six areas at the college showed small gap between Importance and Satisfaction ratings. These were Campus Support Services, Student Centeredness, Academic Services, Campus Climate, Service Excellence, and Instructional Effectiveness.

Greatest Gap - Five areas at the college showed the greatest gap between Importance and Satisfaction ratings. These were Safety and Security, Academic Advising & Counseling, Admissions & Financial Aid, Concern for the Individual, and Registration Effectiveness.

Table 3
Performance Gap Score

Areas	Catonsville	Dundalk	Essex	CCBC
Smallest Gap				
Campus Support Services	0.59	0.20	0.58	0.51
Student Centeredness	0.82	0.39	0.93	0.77
Academic Services	0.91	0.44	0.89	0.80
Campus Climate	0.90	0.48	1.02	0.86
Service Excellence	0.93	0.53	1.09	0.91
Instructional Effectiveness	0.96	0.55	1.05	0.91
Greatest Gap				
Safety and Security	1.50	1.02	1.43	1.37
Academic Advising/Counseling	1.18	0.57	1.36	1.12
Admissions and Financial Aid	1.17	0.70	1.29	1.11
Concern for the Individual	1.11	0.55	1.21	1.03
Registration Effectivenes	1.00	0.66	1.12	0.98

The focus group results supported several of the Noel-Levitz Survey findings. For example, the

areas that supported the N-L findings were financial aid, advising, registration process, student safety, parking, career guidance. The focus groups identified additional areas, which needed attention. These were support for evening students, availability of full-time faculty, class cancellations, additional information on Learning First, etc.

IMPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIES

It is clear that the demographic, student status, student goals, etc. combined with open access policy influence the rates of retention. The results of the Noel-Levitz Survey together with the focus group findings permit the institution to conceptualize its student satisfaction data by retention priorities and marketing opportunities. In addition, it allows the institution to pinpoint areas where resources can be redirected from areas of low importance to areas of high importance. The college Retention Committee is developing a comprehensive set of strategies. These include areas, which have been identified with the greatest performance gap score by the Noel-Levitz Survey findings, as well as effective student orientation, intensive advising of developmental and undeclared majors, mandatory placement of all assessed students, monitoring and follow-up of students, coordination of academic and co-curricular offerings. Other strategies include frequent student-faculty contact, using of multiple approaches directed toward target groups (high-risk students, minority students, and potential drop-outs), peer tutoring, faculty awareness, career counseling, and the establishment of learning support centers.

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